

“An Aesthetic Light,” *The Daily States* (New Orleans, LA), 16 Jun. 1882, 4

Shed by the Presence of the Young Apostle of High Art.

Arrival of Oscar Wilde, Poet, Lecturer and Aesthete.

A Chatty Interview at the St. Charles Hotel.

Oscar Wilde, the apostle of aestheticism, accompanied by his servant and J. V. [*sic*] Vale, Esq., of New York, his private secretary, arrived in the city on the Jackson road, at half-past seven o'clock this morning.¹

No announcement having been made as to what road the apostle would come on there was no crowd present at the depot to meet the party.

They were driven to the St. Charles Hotel, where Oscar was assigned to Parlor 16.

HOW HE TALKS.

When a representative of the STATES called at St. Charles hotel this morning, Mr. Wilde was sitting in his private parlor, surrounded with books and engaged in reading.² He wore light grey trousers, a black velvet coat, or rather jacket, low quarter shoes and bright crimson socks.

The only aesthetic bit of color around him was his necktie, which was of the dull brick red shade known as terra cotta. The visitor's instinctive impression of Mr. Wilde is that he is a very elegant, refined gentleman, cordial in his manner, and charming in conversation.

“Do you not find our climate very oppressive?” asked the reporter. “Not at all,” he answered. “Art belongs to hot countries and I like heat. I enjoy the hot nights here. I can imagine how beautiful the city must look by night. Ah, Night is a great artist.”

“Since you have traveled so extensively through the Northern and Eastern States, what is your opinion of the people generally in the East?”

“I am more than satisfied with my trip. I have visited every city in the East and West, and find the people very charming. California especially is a glorious State and more like the South.

1. Wilde's travelling manager was named J. S. Vale.

2. An interviewer for *The Daily Picayune* who visited Wilde on the same day reported: “Scattered around him, on the floor and on the sofa upon which he sat were a number of paper-bound, yellow-covered, novels in the French language, from the prolific press of Levy of Paris” (“Oscar Wilde,” *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), 16 Jun. 1882, Friday's Afternoon Edition, 11, in Marland, R. (2022) *Oscar Wilde: The Complete Interviews*, I, Little Eye, 422–4, 423).

"When I landed in New York and gave my first lecture there the papers spoke of me rather badly, but after my second lecture they realized the fact that the ideas I wished to inculcate were above the opinion they had gathered from such a satire as "Patience," and they very readily

ACKNOWLEDGED THEIR MISTAKE.

"As they were first inclined to view the matter in a flippant style, it was hard work to convince them, but I enjoyed the fight. Next to having a loyal friend, I think it the most delightful thing in the world to have a brilliant enemy."¹

On being asked how he thought the American women dressed, he answered:

"I was considerably disappointed in that respect. They do not, as a class, dress so well as Europeans, although I have seen some very elegant dressing in America. In the last three years the art of dressing has undergone a remarkable change in England. Dressmakers are mere machines, and the English ladies have learned to study the harmony of color and graceful drapery.

THE FRENCH WOMAN

is made up of furbelows and tight corsets. I had hoped to find American women more artistic in their costumes, but they are still under the ban of dressmakers, although I hope there will be a decided change from that before a great while."

"Do you find the American women to be good talkers?"

"Yes, they are very brilliant and charming. I have heard of your novelist, Mr. George Cable. Is he in the city?² I suppose of course you have a college of music here."

1. After Wilde was attacked in the press by the Chicago preacher David Swing he told an interviewer, "next to a staunch friend, the best thing that a man can have is a brilliant enemy" ("David and Oscar," *The Chicago Sunday Tribune* (Chicago, IL), 5 Mar. 1882, 5, in Marland, I, 249–51, 249). Also compare Lord Henry's remark in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "I choose my friends for their good looks, my acquaintances for their good characters, and my enemies for their good intellects." (Wilde, O. (2005) *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. 3: The Picture of Dorian Gray: The 1890 and 1891 Texts, Vol. 3*, ed. Bristow, J., Oxford University Press)

2. George Washington Cable (1844–1925) was an American novelist. His *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* (1880) follows the fortunes of a French Creole family in the early 1800s. An interviewer for *The Times-Democrat* who visited Wilde on the same day reported: "Among the things he [Wilde] most desired to see here was a voodoo dance. He had read of them in Mr. Cable's novel, and wished he could be present at one." ("Arrival of Mr. Oscar Wilde," *The Times-Democrat* (New Orleans, LA), 17 Jun. 1882, 3, in Marland, I, 424–6, 425.) Wilde sent a telegram to Cable from Galveston on 20 June to arrange for an unspecified 'expedition' on Saturday night, which was 24 June (Tulane University Special Collections; George Washington Cable papers (LaRC-2); box 7; folder 30). An interviewer for *The Daily Picayune* who visited Wilde at his New Orleans hotel on 24 June reported: "The poet had an engagement to go out for the evening, and he shortly took his departure with a party of gentlemen, as it was reported, to witness some mysterious and curious ceremonies of the devotees of voodoo, which were to inaugurate the recurrence of St. John's night, June 24." ("Oscar Wilde," *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), 25 Jun. 1882, 11, in Marland, I, 431–3, 433)

On being told there was none, he expressed deep regret, remarking that the South should be the center of art and that the finest singers should come from New Orleans.

The conversation then drifted back to Boston and New York, Mr. Wilde remarking that Boston was an echo of London.

His question as to whether there were many good actors who visited New Orleans, led to a casual mention of Sarah Bernhardt's visit here. Of the great French actress, he spoke in the most enthusiastic terms, declaring there was not a more gifted or attractive woman living.

BERNHARDT'S TAFFY.

He also said that Madame Bernhardt had told him that in her visit to New Orleans she felt as if it was the one city where the people thoroughly understood and appreciated her.¹

"Have you had any chance to judge of the Southern women? You know they are reputed to be very pretty."

"I have only visited two Southern cities as yet, but the most beautiful women I have ever seen I met in Memphis."²

"I anticipate much pleasure from meeting the Creole ladies in your city. I dare say, their dark eyes are far more dangerous than the yellow fever. But I hear you have a school of art. I shall certainly visit it."

Here the reporter could not resist the temptation to remark that the Art Union was in a very flourishing condition, financially speaking, as they had lately given a mule race for the benefit of the school.³

"A mule race!" he exclaimed; "is it possible! That is sad, very sad. Have you a floral garden here? No? there should be one."

In speaking of his proposed lecture tonight, he remarked he would like to lecture very much in the open air.

1. Bernhardt had performed in New Orleans between 6 and 13 February 1881. In her memoirs she would complain about the poor business she did there and about the squalid and insect-infested hotels, while praising the smiling and joyous inhabitants: "these people had the sun within themselves" (Bernhardt, S. [1907] *My Double Life: Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, William Heinemann, 417-17).

2. Wilde had lectured in Memphis, TN, on 12 June and in Vicksburg, MS, on 14 June. In January and February he had repeatedly told interviewers that Baltimore women were most beautiful in the United States; by July he was stating that "the women of the South were, upon the whole, much more beautiful than any that he had seen in this country" ("Oscar Dear, Oscar Dear!" *The News and Courier* (Charleston, SC), 8 Jul. 1882, 4, in Marland, 438-41, 441).

3. Mule and horse races for the benefit of the Southern Art Union were given at the city fairgrounds on 29 April 1882. One of the mules was named Oscar Wilde. ("High-bred Hybrids", *The Times-Democrat* (New Orleans, LA), 30 Apr. 1882, 3)

"It would be beautiful," he said, "to speak of art under the boughs of the beautiful magnolia tree. I should like that above all things."¹

"Is this the first time you have ever been interviewed by a woman?"

"Oh, no," he answered, "I met several lady reporters in New York and Boston, and was 'interviewed' by three ladies in Cincinnati. They were all very

BRIGHT AND INTERESTING."²

Concerning his plans for the day, Mr. Wilde stated that he would visit the Cathedral and the Art Union, and was exceedingly anxious to see the French Market.

He will leave here on Sunday for a tour through Texas, and then to Florida, and spoke of the probability of returning to New Orleans and giving another lecture, courteously expressing the hope that he would be able to do so, in order to become better acquainted with the people here.³

1. "It is worthwhile to come over here [to the Southern states] merely to see the magnolia in full blossom." ("Oscar Wilde", *The Atlanta Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), 5 Jul. 1882, 81, in Marland, I, 434–7, 436)

2. Wilde had been interviewed by Florence Duncan in Philadelphia in February ("A Chat with Oscar Wilde," *Quiz* (Philadelphia, PA), 25 Jan. 1882, 4, and "Some More," *Quiz* (Philadelphia, PA), 1 Feb. 1882, 4, in Marland, 83–7). He had been interviewed by Mary Watson in San Francisco in April and, when she asked if he had ever met a "lady reporter" before, he replied, "I have not. We do not have them in our country" (Mary Watson, "Oscar Wilde at Home," *The Daily Examiner* (San Francisco, CA), 9 Apr. 1882, 1, in Marland, 322–8, 324). He was interviewed in Cincinnati in February by representatives of the *Daily Gazette*, *Enquirer*, and *Commercial* (twice). None of the interviewers states that they are a woman; the *Enquirer* interviewer is a 'youth', while the *Enquirer* interviewer uses male pronouns.

3. Wilde never visited Florida; this is the only known interview in which he expresses a desire or plan to do so. In his lecture 'Personal Impressions of America' he would state: 'As regards nature, it is difficult to describe, with its variations from the tropical heat of Florida to the chilly cold of New York.' (Dibb, G. [2013] *Oscar Wilde: A Vagabond with a Mission*, The Oscar Wilde Society, 235). He lectured in Texas between 19 and 23 June and gave a second and final lecture in New Orleans on the 26th. Upon his return to the city he was interviewed but not for the *States*.